

QUESTION

If, as Rosalind Gill (2002) notes, the cultural industries are often described as “cool, creative and egalitarian”, why are these industries rife with inequalities? Discuss, making references to specific cultural fields.

INTRODUCTION

According to Rosalind Gill, the cultural and creative industries (CCI) are ‘cool, creative, and egalitarian’ in nature (2002, p.1), yet the reality for cultural and creative workers is that these are ‘industries that are individualized, deregulated and reliant upon cheap or even free labour’ (Gill and Pratt, 2008, p.20). To examine why this apparent contradiction exists within the CCI, this essay will explore the inequalities present in the field of ballet, focusing specifically on gender inequality affecting dancers, choreographers, and company managers from the United States and United Kingdom. The research will reference artists and managers from top tier professional ballet companies, including the English National Ballet, the Royal Ballet, American Ballet Theatre, and New York City Ballet. Through this research, the essay will explore the intercontinental pattern of gender inequality in ballet and how it is affecting cultural work in this field, as well as the reasons why this traditional imbalance is still affecting the creative art form. The research will particularly focus on the writings of Rosalind Gill (2002), Graham Watts (2014), and Jan Van Dyke (1996).

Ballet is specifically applicable to studying the inequalities in the cultural and creative industries because of the genre’s socially elite origins (Karthas, 2012), which have stereotyped the dance genre throughout history and plagued it with issues regarding social, gender, and racial diversity. Viewed through the lens of gender inequality, careers in ballet are revealed to be just as contradictory as the CCI as a whole; for a field populated in majority by women, it has seen major gender imbalances in its leadership roles, both in choreographic and management positions (Van Dyke, 1996). Drawing on research from the US and the UK, this paper suggests that it is the very nature of the art form, combined with historic and societal influences, which produce such inequalities. In studying the gender inequalities in ballet leadership, it can be concluded that the encompassing CCI suffer from the same contradictions because of their inherent structural attributes.

THE ROOTS OF GENDER INEQUALITIES IN BALLET

Ballet’s historic beginnings in the royal courts of France in the seventeenth century began a fluctuating relationship between women and ballet. A genre now so popular with women actually began as a wholly male activity, and not until the tastes of Romanticism took hold in Europe did females begin to take part (Karthas, 2012). After pointe shoes were developed, which helped women embody romantic themes such as ‘beauty, passion, nature, the supernatural, exoticism, and the power of love,’ the masculine technique of ballet ‘became the domain of femininity’ (Ibid., p.963). As more women took the stage, the audiences were largely men, contributing to the ‘eroticization of the female ballet dancer’ (Ibid., p.972). As objects of desire and key sources of income for companies, women were subjected to poor working conditions, low pay, and sexual mistreatment by male patrons, paralleling the sexism that permeates cultural working environments even hundreds of years later (Ibid., p.972; Brooks, et al., 1998, p.247). As female dancers today still struggle to aspire to an image of

glamorous femininity, women focus less on positions of leadership because they are focused on the rigorous technical training they need to perform (Harris, 2012). Performing steadily is the mark of a successful ballet career because ballet, like other creative work, ‘retains some of its elite associations as positive and special’ (Conor, et al., 2015, p.5). Despite the inherent gender inequalities still present today, ballet attracts workers through its celebrated images of beauty and promises of celebrity.

Post-war shifts

The elitism surrounding ballet attempted to lessen in the UK after World War II, when the reopening of the Royal Opera House and introduction of the Sadler’s Wells Ballet (now the Royal Ballet) marked the genre’s resurgence within British culture (Guthrie, 2015). Through restructuring ticket prices and dress code, producers of the new company ‘hoped to chart a middle ground for national culture, attracting a broad audience for high art without undermining its elite cultural status’ (Ibid., p.447). In attracting wider audiences, more young women were witness to ballet’s ideologies of femininity, the glamour, grace, and talent exhibited by the ballerinas visibly leading to prestige. This newfound respect for the art form and glorified image of the ballerina most likely lured more young women into ballet classes throughout England after the war. The nation’s valuing of ballet promised dancers a ‘sense of validation through external recognition’ (Brooks, et al., 1998, p.251) and legitimized the career of a ballerina for many young women through a veil of egalitarianism.

The United States had a similar female-dominated genre in its beginnings, with the founding of eight ballet companies in the 1960s by female artistic directors (Basco, 2015). Yet, similar to the early case in France, as ballet became more profitable and popular throughout the country, men started to take over top positions within companies (Fuhrer 2012). During this ‘ballet boom’, young women idolized such dancers as Maria Tallchief and the English Margot Fonteyn, prompting the opening of more ballet schools (Ibid.). Yet, the feminine image of ballet that had attracted scores of young women to the genre shifted gears during this post-war time period. In a quest for a distinctly American form of ballet, ‘a neoclassical style, exemplified by the plotless works of George Balanchine’ emerged, which was both hailed as representing ‘American ballet’ while also complicating women’s roles in the genre. During this shift towards modernism, ‘representational ballet choreographies were cast as feminine against neoclassicism’s masculinity’ (Harris, 2012, p.32). In a way, ballet had come full circle to rest in its masculine origins, from men running ballet companies as businesses to ‘choreographic styles... drawn in gendered terms’ (Ibid., p.41).

The historic power and image shifts within ballet in both countries reveal the root of the gender inequalities still apparent in ballet today. In the next section, I will highlight recent statistics that indicate this continued gender imbalance within the field.

THE REALITIES OF GENDER INEQUALITIES AND BALLET TODAY

In a 2013 survey of 50 leading ballet companies around the world, Graham Watts found that while ‘56 percent of dancers are women... this proportion falls to only 18 percent of artistic directors’ and ‘there was only one woman resident choreographer for every 15 men’ (p.19). This survey, combined with other writers’ probing articles about the lack of female representation in choreographic and managerial roles (Van Dyke, 1996; Harris, 2012; Jennings, 2013; Fuhrer, 2012; Fushille, 2010), demonstrates the immediate issue of gender

diversity within the field. Studying the following four major ballet companies in the UK and US demonstrates a pattern of discrimination and unequal opportunity affecting females in ballet that spans an ocean, despite both countries' ballet artists being majority women.

UK: The Royal Ballet and English National Ballet

The Royal Ballet enjoyed two periods of female executive leadership, yet it has been 15 years since a woman created a piece on their main stage (Watts, 2014). In fact, over the 83-year lifetime of the company, the main stage has seen only 15 pieces choreographed between seven women (Ibid., p.21). The company's current male director sees no favoritism towards men, nor barriers to women choreographers in the company. In an interview with Watts, he generalizes that 'there have always been fewer female choreographers' (Ibid., p.21). Yet in the company's performance database, 28 works were created by female company members in the last decade, and none 'progressed beyond the experimental programmes' (Ibid., p.21). One of these choreographers was Vanessa Fenton, who eventually left the company after her work was met with 'a pat on the head from the director' and her superiors made her feel as if 'there was something abhorrent about a free-thinking woman' (Jennings, 2013). Choreographer Cathy Marston met with similar double standards when trying to choreograph for the company, realizing that her male counterparts could 'charm' their way through situations that she couldn't without being labeled as 'a flirt' (Ibid.).

The English National Ballet, seems to be one classical company hoping to pave the way for women in ballet recently. Much of this change of direction is the work of recent Artistic Director and principal dancer, Tamara Rojo, whose entrepreneurial spirit and passionate forward-thinking helped pull the company out of an economic downturn (Mackrell, 2015). Rojo lost some long-time supporters of the company from her inventive re-branding and programming, including an anticipated triple bill of all-female work set for April 2016 (Ibid.). Amidst critics, Rojo's changes at the top lends to her belief that 'we need more women's voices on stage' (Ibid.) Still, she gets more male choreographic applicants within her company than females, having to seek out women personally but finding 'they're much less quick than men to accept work' (Ibid.). Many of their excuses were similar to reasons why women in other creative fields have difficulty securing or seeking work – obligations to family and children, and feeling insecure or unready for such a spotlight (Ibid.; Brooks, et al., 1998, p.252).

US: New York City Ballet and American Ballet Theatre

Though New York City Ballet (NYCB) founder George Balanchine famously said 'ballet is woman,' his own company demographics show that ballet is only woman onstage, rather than in choreography or management (La Rocco, 2007). In appointing his successor, Balanchine always wanted a man, eventually choosing dancer Peter Martins because 'he knows what a ballerina needs' (Ibid.). Martins still runs the company today, and joins a large group of men at the top of American ballet companies - 86 percent of the US's 43 major ballet companies were run by men in a 2002 study by Dance/USA (Ibid.). In 1994, NYCB's diamond project only included three women choreographers out of 12 (Dunning, 1994), and that number went down to zero this season, as young, white men were the only company dancers to premiere new choreographic works at their 2015 gala (Wingenroth, 2015). In an interview with the females of the diamond project, all agreed that many of their fellow women had little interest in creating over performing, citing lack of creative development and feeling intimidated by their many male superiors (Dunning, 1994). The recent 2015 gala only affirms that NYCB's

‘pattern of white men supporting younger white men’ has continued even ten years later, and ‘determines whose work will be seen’ (Wingenroth, 2015).

American Ballet Theatre (ABT) has seen a bit more gender diversity recently, both in their choreographic efforts and management. In 2008, the company began a women’s choreography project that provided training, workshops, and showcases for aspiring female choreographers (Fuhrer, 2012). Just four years before that program, former ABT corps de ballet member Rachel Moore took over as executive director of the company (Boehm, 2015). Making the jump to such a powerful leadership position gave Moore first-hand insight into how ‘ballerinas very roles — from cookie-cutter corps parts to male-supported partnering — influence offstage power relations’ (La Rocco, 2007). In her 12 years at the helm of the company, she helped the company raise their endowment and stabilize their finances, while growing outreach programs and improving ABT’s national identity (Boehm, 2015). Quoted in many articles on the subject of gender inequality in the field, she puts forward that ‘the culture of how boys and girls are trained’ in ballet leads to inequities in leadership positions (Basco, 2015; La Rocco, 2007).

ANALYZING GENDER INEQUALITIES IN BALLET

Despite the evidence presented in the above section by such research, many women don’t see this imbalance themselves (Van Dyke, 1996; Watts, 2014), a trait of women across the CCI (Gill, 2002, pp.84-86). Still, inequalities do exist in hard facts, as men earned twice the amount of money from choreography than women in a US survey from 1993, even though females had the same experience level and a higher education level (Van Dyke, 1996, p.541). An understanding of the factors that have led to such inequalities is needed to truly enact a change in the future trajectory of ballet leadership.

The Impact of Female Competition

A major contributing factor to the continued inequalities in ballet relates to the number of women interested in the career. Increased competition for employment in the field has led to women’s ‘singular focus on the physical, perhaps to the exclusion of creativity’ (Fuhrer, 2012). In order for women to be successful, they require an incredible amount of training time on technical skills and performance. Growing up, as ABT’s Jessica Lang puts it, girls ‘learn you’re replaceable, and that the more obedient and quieter you are, the better you’ll do’ (Ibid.). Another ABT choreographer, Anna Laerkesen, suggests that ballet’s emphasis on technique and aesthetics teaches dancers that ‘being a good girl meant performing, not creating’ so that their creative side was not nurtured (Dunning, 1994). Similarly, the artistic and executive director of Smuin Ballet in San Francisco suggests the situation comes from women being ‘so intent on solidifying their performing careers that they don’t appear to exhibit an interest in artistic management’ (Fushille, 2010). For many of those women who don’t become successful performers, ‘they tend to extend their educations in order to sustain an active involvement in the field,’ which is why dance departments in the US have largely female leadership (Van Dyke, 1996, p.538).

The Impact of Increased Male Encouragement

Another factor of these continued inequalities goes back to Moore’s insight on training culture between genders. With a majority of women dancers, more men were needed for

partnering and ‘to legitimize the field by equalizing the numbers’ (Ibid., p.542). In giving more men attention and opportunities, they have been offered privileged positions now evident statistically, as males ‘receive jobs as performers out of proportion to their representation as dance students’ (Ibid., p.542). As boys became ‘trophies’ in the ballet world, they gained scholarships and acclaim, along with encouragement ‘to be much more individual, to do solos, to stand out more than the girl’ (Moore in Basco, 2015). In such a culture, ‘this daily reinforcing of traditional gender roles translates into a loss of confidence and lowered expectations for young female dancers’ (Van Dyke, 1996, p.542). While men are coveted dancers, and allowed room to explore their individuality, women have expectations of obedience that inhibit them from exploring their creativity and excelling as leaders.

The Impact of Societal Expectations

A third major factor is the inherent societal expectations of women in any sort of career, and their more specific relationship to a creative field like ballet. Because of the rigor of ballet training and increasing competition between women in the field, dancers tend to focus on their careers right out of school. This unorthodox path can affect the timing of ‘obtaining an advanced degree, finding a partner, and experiencing motherhood’ (Fushille, 2010). Many choices must be made concerning such womanly life goals as motherhood and family, and the reality of creative careers like that of ballet, with patterns of sparse work and little support for assisted childcare, makes such fields specifically disadvantageous to women (La Rocco, 2007; Conor, et al., 2015; Gill, 2002). Furthermore, creative and cultural work as a whole, including ballet, ‘reflects larger inequities between the sexes’ built into society over generations (La Rocco, 2007). Board members at companies are less likely to trust women in an executive position, holding men at a different standard, while a lack of women role models influences ‘another generation that will not know that it can aspire, even *aspire*, to rise into’ leadership roles in the field (Ibid.). Moore further speculates that ballet’s historical reflection of gender roles ‘probably exacerbate what already exists in our society’ (Ibid.).

CONCLUSIONS

Much recent research has been done on creative and cultural work in relation to the ‘gendered patterns of disadvantage and exclusion’ (Conor, et al., 2015, p.1) affecting women in the CCI today. This essay analyzed how these patterns are represented in the specific cultural field of ballet, and why their deeply ingrained history within the field still affects labor today. In looking more closely at major ballet companies in the US and the UK, it was revealed that the issue of women’s representation and the barriers women face in attaining leadership roles are rooted in the genre’s inherent ‘distinctive features [which] may contribute to inequalities’ (Conor, et al., 2015, p.8), much like the CCI as a whole. Precarity and job insecurity amidst high levels of competition, a biased training culture, project-based and physically demanding work, as well as a deeply ingrained division of gender roles all disadvantage women in ballet as much as other work in the CCI, keeping women from advancing into leadership roles.

Many choreographers and directors speak to the idea that gender should not influence what works get put on stage, or who gets hired in a leadership role (Watts, 2014), yet the historic and continuing disadvantages to women in ballet ‘means that norms are passed from generation to generation unchallenged’ (Coates in La Rocco, 2007). The available research and statistics presented in this paper show a need for the ballet field now to focus on actions, rather than speculations, to combat these obvious gender diversity issues. Bottom-up change,

like that of adding more creative composition courses to ballet curriculums, will offer encouragement for younger female dancers to choreograph and contribute to eventually leveling the field between genders. It is essentially in the hands of both the men and women in executive, artistic, and choreographic roles today to act as models for younger dancers, to educate and inspire equal opportunities by changing the structural norms of the genre. When women don't need their own special night of work – because their work is equally presented alongside men's choreography within regular programs – ballet will have become a truly 'egalitarian' field of work.

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